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ETHICS AND THE COSMIC ORDER.

A CRITICISM OF PROFESSOR THOMAS H. HUXLEY'S POSITION.

EVER since the doctrine of evolution has been accepted by the thinkers of mankind, the people have shown an extraordinary interest in its ethical and religious corollaries. And who can blame them? For in fact these apparently side issues are after all the main problems, in comparison with which all other inferences and applications sink into insignificance. No wonder that people listen with bated breath when a man of science who is thoroughly familiar with all the results of modern investigations, in their relative certainty and uncertainty, frankly sets forth his views of man's relation to the cosmos. Mankind is yearning for truth, for we need truth. Truth is the daily bread of our spiritual life, and if the sciences are what they pretend to be, if they present to us, each in its own domain, exact statements of truth, religion cannot unheedingly pass them by.

Prof. Thomas H. Huxley's lecture on "Evolution and Ethics," (London: Macmillan & Co., 1893,) appears to be the most important publication of this kind made of late. The view of the great scientist on ethics would have produced a sensation, if he had not prepared the public for its reception by former occasional utterances. His standpoint is radical in the extreme. A Schopenhauer *redivivus*, he denounces in most vigorous terms the world as a whole, and scorns theodicies not less than cosmodicies of all kinds. He boldly declares "that cosmic nature is no school of virtue, but the headquarters of the enemy of ethical nature," and is firmly convinced by the logic of facts "that the cosmos works through the lower nature

of man, not for righteousness, but against it." Ethics has no home here on earth, for according to his drastic comparison, it is like Jack's ascent into fairy-land on the bean-stalk; he says:

"The hero of our story descended the bean-stalk, and came back to the common world, where fare and work were alike hard; where ugly competitors were much commoner than beautiful princesses; and where the everlasting battle with self was much less sure to be crowned with victory than a turn-to with a giant. We have done the like. Thousands upon thousands of our fellows, thousands of years ago, have preceded us in finding themselves face to face with the same dread problem of evil. They also have seen that the cosmic process is evolution; that it is full of wonder, full of beauty, and, at the same time, full of pain. They have sought to discover the bearing of these great facts on ethics; to find out whether there is, or is not, a sanction for morality in the ways of the cosmos."

Professor Huxley leaves no doubt as to his reply to this problem. He sums up the case, saying:

"Thus, brought before the tribunal of ethics, the cosmos might well seem to stand condemned. . . . But few, or none, ventured to record that verdict."

With special severity the great scientist criticises "the fallacies" which pervade the so-called "ethics of evolution." He says:

"As the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist. Cosmic evolution may teach us how the good and the evil tendencies of man may have come about; but, in itself, it is incompetent to furnish any better reason why what we call good is preferable to what we call evil than we had before."

Concerning the fallacy which identifies "the fittest" and "the best" he says:

"I suspect that this fallacy has arisen out of the unfortunate ambiguity of the phrase 'survival of the fittest.' 'Fittest' has a connotation of 'best'; and about 'best' there hangs a moral flavor. In cosmic nature, however, what is 'fittest' depends upon the conditions. Long since, I ventured to point out that if our hemisphere were to cool again, the survival of the fittest might bring about, in the vegetable kingdom, a population of more and more stunted and humbler and humbler organisms, until the 'fittest' that survived might be nothing but lichens, diatoms, and such microscopic organisms as those which give red snow its color; while, if it became hotter, the pleasant valleys of the Thames and Isis might be uninhabitable by any animated beings save those that flourish in a tropical jungle. They, as the fittest, the best adapted to the changed conditions, would survive."

Professor Huxley goes farther still in his denial of any ethical element in the order of nature. He says :

" For his successful progress, as far as the savage state, man has been largely indebted to those qualities which he shares with the ape and the tiger ; his exceptional physical organisation ; his cunning, his sociability, his curiosity, and his imitativeness ; his ruthless and ferocious destructiveness, when his anger is roused by opposition.

" But . . . these deeply ingrained serviceable qualities have become defects. Civilised man would gladly kick down the ladder by which he has climbed. . . . In fact, civilised man brands all these ape and tiger promptings with the name of sins ; he punishes many of the acts which flow from them as crimes ; and, in extreme cases, he does his best to put an end to the survival of the fittest of former days by axe and rope.

" The science of ethics professes to furnish us with a reasoned rule of life ; to tell us what is right action and why it is so. Whatever difference of opinion may exist among experts, there is a general consensus that the ape and tiger methods of the struggle for existence are not reconcilable with sound ethical principles."

A great part of Professor Huxley's lecture is filled with an appreciative account of Buddha's doctrines. " It is a remarkable indication of the subtlety of Indian speculation," he says, " that Gautama should have seen deeper than the greatest of modern idealists. . . . Gautama proceeded to eliminate substance altogether ; and to reduce the cosmos to a mere flow of sensations, emotions, volitions, and thoughts, devoid of any substratum." But the salient point is, " to the early philosophers of Hindostan, no less than to those of Ionia, it was plain that suffering is the badge of all the tribe of sentient beings "; and suffering " is no accidental accompaniment, but an essential constituent of the cosmic process." Professor Huxley sketches the philosophical evolution of India and Greece as follows :

" In Hindostan, as in Ionia, a period of relatively high and tolerably stable civilisation had succeeded long ages of semi-barbarism and struggle. Out of wealth and security had come leisure and refinement, and, close at their heels, had followed the malady of thought."

Quietism, we are told, was the final outcome of Indian and of Græco-Roman thought ; for, says Professor Huxley, the Apatheia of Stoic philosophy and the Nirvâna of Buddhism are very similar.

"The Vedas and the Homeric epos set before us a world of rich and vigorous life. . . . A few centuries pass away and, under the influence of civilisation, the descendants of these men are 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'—frank pessimists, or at best, make-believe optimists. The courage of the warlike stock may be as hardly tried as before, perhaps more hardly, but the enemy is self. The hero has become a monk. The man of action is replaced by the quietist, whose highest aspiration is to be the passive instrument of the divine Reason. By the Tiber, as by the Ganges, ethical man admits that the cosmos is too strong for him; and, destroying every bond which ties him to it by ascetic discipline, he seeks salvation in absolute renunciation."

This view of life apparently leaves us in utter desolation; but Professor Huxley is not quite so pessimistic as he appears in these quotations. He does not recommend quietism, but proposes that we should fight the cosmos:

"Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it."

The risk of combating the cosmic process is great, but Professor Huxley relies on man's intelligence. He continues:

"It may seem an audacious proposal thus to pit the microcosm against the macrocosm and to set man to subdue nature to his higher ends; but, I venture to think that the great intellectual difference between the ancient times with which we have been occupied and our day, lies in the solid foundation we have acquired for the hope that such an enterprise may meet with a certain measure of success."

"The history of civilisation details the steps by which men have succeeded in building up an artificial world within the cosmos."

Accordingly, in Professor Huxley's mind, artificiality built upon intelligence, is the saving power! All his denunciations of "the injustice of the nature of things, of the unethical character of the cosmic order, and of the moral indifference of the selective factors of evolution" serve simply as a foil to this idea. But Professor Huxley does not appear to see, that there is no choice left us. If our rules of conduct do not ultimately rest upon the order of nature, they must be of supernatural origin. That kind of art, of intelligence, and of theory, which is artificial in the sense that it neither grows out of nature nor remains in agreement with the laws of nature, but combats the cosmic order, is nothing but a dream, an impossibility; and thus

the final outcome of the whole lecture would be highly disappointing, if the five concluding paragraphs did not contain a few sentences which stand in striking contrast to the rest. Considering the fact that "the organised and highly developed sciences and arts of the present day have endowed man with a command over the course of non-human nature greater than that attributed to the magicians," Professor Huxley sees "no limit to the extent to which intelligence and will, guided by sound principles of investigation, and organised in common effort, may modify the conditions of existence, for a period longer than that now covered by history." But he adds :

"I deem it an essential condition of the realisation of that hope that we should cast aside the notion that the escape from pain and sorrow is the proper object of life."

If escape from pain and sorrow is not the proper object of life, Professor Huxley need not be so impatient at the existence of pain and suffering. Intelligence and will, he says, must be "guided by sound principles of investigation"; but what are "sound principles of investigation" if not those by which we succeed in solving the problems of existence ; sound are such principles only as are endorsed by the cosmos. Trust in science is incompatible with denunciations of the cosmic order. To show the full significance of this idea we shall now review Professor Huxley's propositions and call attention to what we consider the defects of his argument.

* * *

We miss in Professor Huxley's writings any definite and clear meaning of the term ethics. Ethics is the science of moral conduct. But what do we mean by "moral goodness." Will Professor Huxley be satisfied to accept without criticism the traditional meaning of morality? Is he good who keeps the ten Mosaic commandments, or he who loves his enemies and resists not evil? Must we consider as moral the Christian injunction to turn the left cheek to him who smites us on our right cheek? Or must we regard him as good who follows the Homeric principle of excelling all others? * Shall we adopt the hedonistic view and define good as that which produces

* αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπέρμενον ἐμμεναι ἄλλων.

the greatest amount of pleasurable feelings? Who shall decide whether your conception of good and evil, or mine, or that of the Christian, or that of the Greek, or that of the Buddhist, or that of the Confucian is to be regarded as the standard?

Judging from one passage of the present lecture, Professor Huxley may have adopted the intuitionist view, which claims that good cannot be defined and that in our judgment of it we must rely upon our intuition.* Intuitionism, however, will render ethics, as a science, impossible, and relegate it to the realm of unsettled opinions. The proposition that all intuitions are equally justified, each one in its own subjective sphere, practically amounts to a most radical denial of ethics, as much so as agnosticism, when declaring that the fundamental problems of philosophy are insolvable, is tantamount to a denial of philosophy as a science.

Is there any other criterion than experience, and what is the test of experience but an appeal to the cosmic order of nature? Indeed, we have no choice left us, but must investigate all the different ethical systems to determine which one is the strongest, which one will produce the type of mankind that is fittest to survive ; which one is best adapted to the cosmic order of the world.

The cosmos and the constitution of the cosmos must after all furnish us the necessary data from which we have to construct our criterion of ethics. Ethics is not a Jack's ascent to fairy-land on a bean-stalk, but a systematic presentation of the rules of conduct for practical life. Professor Huxley rightly urges that the survival of the fittest among plants depends upon surrounding conditions ; under unfavorable conditions, such as prevail in the arctic zones and on the Alpine ridges, mosses and lichens only will survive, while the Sahara is uninhabitable for civilised mankind. In the same way we urge that in the survival of the fittest in society and also in the survival of the fittest among the different systems of society, those will survive that adapt themselves most closely to the conditions which

* He says : " Some day, I doubt not, we shall arrive at an understanding of the evolution of the æsthetic faculty ; but all the understanding in the world will neither increase nor diminish the force of the intuition that this is beautiful and that is ugly."

social life necessarily exhibits according to the constitution of the cosmos.*

Professor Huxley says that "man has been largely indebted for his successful progress to those qualities which he shares with the ape and tiger . . . and he now kicks down the ladder by which he has climbed." This is a misstatement of the case. If by "those qualities" Professor Huxley means, as he explicitly says, "those ape and tiger promptings" which "civilised man brands with the name of sins," he is obviously mistaken. If that were so, why have neither the tiger nor the ape attained to the power of man? We cannot consider the rise of man's power a mere accident, for it is plain enough that ape and tiger have failed to adapt themselves to the conditions of a higher life, while man has climbed the ladder, because of his rational insight, which reveals to him a truer knowledge of things and enables him to adapt his methods more perfectly to the cosmic order of existence. However, if Professor Huxley means those nobler qualities of ape and tiger which these animals share with man, viz., sociability, imitateness, or a talent of adaptation to circumstances in the ape, and indomitable energy in the tiger, we should say that civilised man has no reason "to kick down the ladder by which he has climbed." On the contrary, the stronger these qualities are in him, the more rapidly will he advance in the future.

Says Professor Huxley :

"Social progress means a checking of the cosmic process at every step and the substitution for it of another, which may be called the ethical process ; the end of which is not the survival of those who may happen to be the fittest, in respect of the whole of the conditions which exist, but of those who are ethically the best."

We say: Social progress becomes possible *only* through a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the cosmic order of the world, and it consists in a more and more perfect adaptation to the

* That "the best" societies are in the long run "the fittest to survive," does not exclude the fact that what in social life appears as a "defect" is often actually favorable for the preservation of animals and plants and also of single individuals. The terms "best" and "fittest to survive" must therefore not be regarded as identical. As it would lead us too far here to discuss the problem in detail, we refer the reader to the articles, "The Test of Progress" and "The Ethics of Evolution," in *Homilies of Science*, pp. 36-47.

ethical rules derived from our better insight into the laws of our being.

While speaking disparagingly of theodicies, Professor Huxley says they are, so far as he knows, "all variations of the theme set forth in those famous six lines of Pope," which end with the words :

"And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear : whatever is, is right."

Professor Huxley justly criticises this sentiment which stifles every aspiration and paralyses every effort, saying : "Why try to set right what is right already? Why strive to improve the best of all possible worlds? Let us eat and drink, for as to-day all is right, so to-morrow all will be."

Here we would suggest to Professor Huxley that he make a distinction between the facts of nature and the cosmic constitution of the world. The world as it now surrounds us, the present state of things is such as it is in consequence of innumerable events, which, according to the law of cause and effect, have produced us and our surrounding conditions. One of the most obtrusive features of existence is that the present state of things and the conditions which surround us are always imperfect. There is always room for improvement ; the path of progress is infinite, and whatever is, is always somehow faulty. The cosmic order of the world, however, is immutable and above all attempts at improvement. The constitution of the universe consists in those features of reality which the scientist describes in what we commonly call the laws of nature. It is, for instance, a constitutional feature of the universe that lies have injurious effects upon those who accept them as truths, and also upon those who promulgate them, as soon as they are found out. We call such consequences of evil deeds their curses. Now, we should say that such evil conditions as are the consequences of sin, are in themselves evils, but the law, that makes curses the wages of sin, is no evil.

We do not intend to write either a Theodicy or a Cosmodicy, because neither God nor the cosmos needs it ; they justify themselves. Just as much as they are above all criticism, they need no defence from the poor pen of a mortal scribbler. There is no use

either for an indictment of the cosmic order, or for a condemnation of it, or for a justification of it, since we can neither convict it, nor punish it, nor educate it to our peculiar views of moral goodness.

All indictments of the cosmic order, such as those made by John Stuart Mill and Professor Huxley, are mere misstatements of the case. That the world is full of misery cannot be denied ; it is also true that the evil-doer involves in the curse of his sin a great number of other persons, and that pain and suffering are necessary accompaniments and essential constituents of life ; but those, who like Mill, solemnly arraign nature for "deliberate" murder because every living being that is born must die, and those who like Huxley, when speaking of pleasures and pains, make the objection that "it is admittedly impossible for the lower orders of sentient beings to deserve (sic!) either the one or the other," are guilty of anthropomorphism.

We may speak of "the unfathomable injustice of the nature of things" only when we look upon the world as a whole, as a personal being, and upon every single man as an individual soul-entity, who, from some unknown sphere is, like Hamlet, "a no less blameless dreamer, dragged, in spite of himself, into a world out of joint."* This view adopts the old, mythological theory, which individualises God and man, yet drops at the same time those other allegorical notions of immortality and a transcendental heaven above the world which are its indispensable complements. It is natural that when we remain with one foot in the old domain of thought and simply lift the other without yet stepping into the next higher sphere of progress, we have assumed no firm position. He who takes such an attitude should not, because of the inconsistency of his own position, blame the world. If a man looks through spectacles which contain lenses of greatly different strength, he must not complain that things are out of shape, but must seek the fault in the medium through which he looks at his surroundings.†

* These are Huxley's own words, *Evolution and Ethics*, p. 13.

† John Stuart Mill's denunciation of Nature which anticipates some of the most vigorous expressions of Professor Huxley, is found in his essay on Nature. For a criticism of Mill's position see the writer's article "Nature and Morality" (*The Open Court*, Nos. 239, 241, and 242).

The attitude of both Mr. Mill and Professor Huxley is the more singular as both must be perfectly conscious of the erroneousness of their position. Professor Huxley indeed recognises the fact that, "strictly speaking, social life and the ethical process are part and parcel of the general process of evolution"; but this statement appears only in a forlorn passage among the notes of his appendix. He makes no use of it and bases the main propositions of his lecture upon statements that are only loosely speaking correct.

Professor Huxley might have found a cosmodicy in the Buddhist doctrine of Karma which he admirably epitomises as follows :

"Everyday experience familiarises us with the facts which are grouped under the name of heredity. Every one of us bears upon him obvious marks of his parentage, perhaps of remoter relationships. More particularly, the sum of tendencies to act in a certain way, which we call 'character,' is often to be traced through a long series of progenitors and collaterals. So we may justly say that this 'Character'—this moral and intellectual essence of a man—does veritably pass over from one fleshly tabernacle to another and does really transmigrate from generation to generation. In the new-born infant, the character of the stock lies latent and the Ego is little more than a bundle of potentialities. But, very early, these become actualities; from childhood to age they manifest themselves in dullness or brightness, weakness or strength, viciousness or uprightness; and with each feature modified by confluence with another character, if by nothing else, the character passes on to its incarnation in new bodies.

"The Indian philosophers called character, as thus defined, 'karma.' It is this karma which passed from life to life and linked them in the chain of transmigrations; and they held that it is modified in each life, not merely by confluence of parentage, but by its own acts."

Professor Huxley adds in his notes :

"In the theory of evolution, the tendency of a germ to develop according to a certain specific type, e. g., of the kidney bean seed to grow into a plant having all the characters of *Phaseolus vulgaris* is its 'Karma.' It is the 'last inheritor and the last result' of all the conditions that have affected a line of ancestry which goes back for many millions of years to the time when life first appeared on the earth. . . . As Prof. Rhys Davids aptly says, the snowdrop 'is a snowdrop and not an oak, and just that kind of a snowdrop, because it is the outcome of the Karma of an endless series of past existences.' ('Hibbert Lectures,' p. 114.)"

If this Buddhistic view of Karma is correct, the present state of existence on earth is the exact product of the actions that have

taken place here upon our planet since its formation as an independent body in the solar system. The constitution of the universe is such that we reap as we have sown. When we say "we," it is understood that it means not our present individualised existence only, but our entire Karma, past, present, and future. It includes all the causes of our being ; even the bad company from whose vices we suffer are, in this sense, a part of our own making. Thus it becomes apparent that not God is guilty of the evil conditions of our state of being, but we ourselves ; we have not been "dragged into a world out of joint," but we ourselves are the creators, not only of our character, but also of the plight in which we are. There is no fault to be found with the constitutional order of being which punishes those who go astray ; we alone are the sinners, and if we expect delivery from evil, we must be our own saviours.

It appears to be Professor Huxley's opinion that Buddha and all those moral teachers whose final goal of moral conduct he characterises as quietism, have condemned the cosmos ; but this proposition is more plausible than correct. We think that Buddha's position was slightly different from what Professor Huxley represents it. Buddha taught a suppression of all sinful desires, of selfishness, covetousness, and lusts, but at the same time did not tire in his exhortations of rousing oneself from indifference to energetic activity, and of working out one's own salvation with diligence. Whatever Buddha may have taught, we should say that energetic work and intense activity is one of the most urgent demands which the constitution of the cosmos makes on all its children. And we trust that no great moral teacher, Buddha not excepted, was a quietist in the usual sense of the term.

Professor Huxley says (on page 33) :

"The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint."

It is true enough, that goodness or virtue requires not "self-assertion," but "self-restraint" ; or as Professor Huxley says on page 29, "the enemy is self." But it is not true that self-restraint

is "a course of conduct which in all respects is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence." Even tigers succeed in the struggle for existence only because their self-assertion is tempered with self-restraint; and man succeeds better than tigers and apes, in exactly the degree in which he is more perfectly familiar with the conditions that lead to success in that struggle. Man uses his knowledge with greater energy, not of muscle, but of mental concentration, and with more complete self-possession. Buddha's quietism (if I interpret his Dharma rightly) consists in the recognition of the truth that "self is the enemy," but while we must replace self-assertion by self-restraint, we must not sink into the indolence of quietism. On the contrary, all the energy which human tigers waste in the service of selfishness should be employed to promote those duties which the cosmic order prescribes.

If Professor Huxley had recognised the difference which obtains between the laws of nature and the temporary state of things, he would scarcely have filed his indictment against the cosmic order. The laws of nature are a constitutional feature of the universe; they are irrefragable, immutable, eternal, and admit of no exception. It makes no difference whether we praise the cosmic order or denounce it, whether we like it or dislike it. It is the voice of God; nay, it is God himself in all his omnipotence and sternness. It is the Jahveh who was, is, and will be. We may, with Professor Huxley, bring it before the tribunal of ethics and boldly declare that it stands condemned; but we cannot set up a rule of life against it. Nothing will stand that contradicts it, and no definition of moral goodness goes to the bottom of truth, unless it casts its anchor in this bed-rock of facts.

Professor Huxley believes in the efficacy of "intelligence and will guided by sound principles of investigation"; in a word, he believes in science. And here we find ourselves in perfect agreement with him. We only wish him to know that if he adopts this belief in science as a living faith applicable to practical life and uses it for the elaboration of an ethical system, it will, if consistently thought out in all its consequences, lead him to that world-conception which we call the Religion of Science.

Belief in science means that truth can be investigated, found, and clearly stated; and truth clearly stated reveals to us the rules of right conduct.

Are science, and truth, and also the higher life of civilisation, as it becomes possible by a better understanding of truth,—are they indeed artificial worlds within the cosmos; do they really stand in such contradictory opposition to the cosmic order of nature as Professor Huxley would fain make us believe? Is the animal nearer than man to nature, and is ploughing, as Mr. Mill states, an infringement upon the natural order of things? Certainly not. For what are the results of science, but a knowledge of the world? They furnish us with a revelation of the constitution of the universe! And what is truth but a perfect description of the facts of nature summed up in their essential and permanent features? Will Professor Huxley glorify science and condemn that reality which science reveals? Will he exalt truth and scorn the original whose copy and portrait truth is? Will he boast of man's intelligence and the scientist's "sound principles of investigation," while he laughs to scorn the order of the cosmos, which is the prototype of man's reason and the God in whose image rational beings have been created?

The epiphany of truth in science and the religious trust in the ethical worth of truth proves that God—not the personal God of supernaturalism, but the superpersonal God of a scientific conception, the life that beats in our hearts and quickens every atom of the universe—is a living power still. We confess that we have abandoned the old, narrow dogmatism of the traditional religions, which Professor Huxley has frequently taken occasion to criticise with caustic humor and severe ridicule. But our attitude differs from his in one respect: we reject the mythology of religion only, but not its essential meaning. The Religion of Science preserves all that is worth preserving. It preserves the holy zeal for the ideals of righteousness and justice; it cherishes a personal relation to the source of our being and the authority of moral conduct; it stimulates the fervid aspiration onward through toil, disappointments, and sacrifices to victory; through doubt and darkness to light; and through hours of tribulation and anxiety to a bright fulfilment of

our hopes. “He that sat upon the throne said : Behold I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write : for these words are true and faithful.”

EDITOR.